



WHEN SHEEP CAN'T SLEEP

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Didn't they do a great job? I want to thank our cast for filling us in on what the sheep were thinking on that first Christmas night. The Bible seems to have left out the part about sheep having insomnia.

As funny as that sounds, it's not far off from a truth about sheep. I was not aware of this, but apparently sheep really can have difficulty relaxing enough to fall asleep sometimes.

Author Phillip Keller spent several years shepherding sheep in British Columbia, and he got to know their quirky habits. He says this:

The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very makeup, it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down, unless four requirements are met.

He then goes on to outline those four things. Any guesses what they might be?

First, they have to **be free from all fear**. Sheep are very skittish and nervous, and they need reassurance that they are safe from all the predators and storms that threaten them. It's a dangerous world for sheep.

Secondly, sheep **can't stand friction or tension** with other sheep. That one surprised me. They are social animals, and the dynamics between them need to be good or they can't relax.

Third, they **can't have any bugs or parasites** eating at them. It's really hard to rest when something is gnawing at you and you can't do anything about it.

And fourth, if they're hungry, **they need to be fed** before they'll lie down. They need to go to sleep on a full stomach.

All four of these needs have to be met by a shepherd. Sheep can't take care of themselves. They can't alleviate their own fears. If there is danger, what's a sheep going to be able to do? If there's a problem between two sheep, they can't exactly talk it out on their own – somebody needs to come and separate them or solve the issue between them. They can't get rid of their own parasites. And they can't find where the good food is on

their own. . They're helpless in their own condition, and they need somebody else to come and take care of their needs.

The Bible describes God as a shepherd, and us as his sheep. In fact, it goes so far as to say we're very restless sheep who wander off. We don't feel settled very easily. But in the Christmas story, we see God acting like a good shepherd, providing everything we need so that we can rest. He addresses the same four needs regular sheep have.

For example, the shepherds were terrified when the angel showed up out there in the field. And what was the first thing he said to them? "Do not be afraid." God's message in sending Jesus is that we no longer need to fear. We don't have to be afraid of him or of facing death or anything in this life, because he is now with us. He will go with us through whatever we face. God helps us become free of fear from the enemies and storms that threaten us.

He also knows how friction and tension between people can cause so many problems. Like sheep, we are social creatures and our relationships affect us deeply. Probably everyone in this room knows what it is like to lose sleep over tension between you and someone else. So it makes sense that the angel choir would say, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to men on whom his favor rests." Jesus is God's way of bringing peace to our souls and peace between people. He alone is able to heal up broken relationships. And as a good shepherd, that is what he desires for us.

Shepherds also take care of whatever is eating at their sheep. And for us, that's our sin. Our own bad choices are so destructive, and we're so helpless to change on our own. We can't do anything about it. But the angel told the shepherds that the baby born in the city of David would be a "Savior" – someone capable of rescuing and delivering us from this horrible condition.

The story of the shepherds ends by saying this:

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Everything turned out just the way they had been told it would. What filled the shepherds' tanks more than anything was the discovery that God is who he says he is. We are all hungering for something that is bigger and truer than us. Deep down we have this void that can only be filled by God himself. And he proves to be exactly who he says he is.

Ira Sankey was famous singer and composer in the 1800s. He would often travel with D.L. Moody and sing at his revival meetings. He was a big man with a big voice. I listened to a recording of him singing online that dates back to 1898. It was incredible to hear a voice from more than 100 years ago.

On Christmas Eve 1876, Mr. Sankey was traveling by steamboat down the Delaware River. As you can imagine, people on the boat that night were feeling a little forlorn, being away from home while their families were home celebrating together.

Many of the passengers had gathered on the deck, and eventually somebody recognized Sankey. Soon people were saying, "Let him sing for us! Let's ask Mr. Sankey to sing!" He agreed, and before he started, he stopped for a moment, trying to decide what to sing. Being Christmas Eve, he was racking his brain for the right Christmas carol. But the song he kept coming back to was Savior Like A Shepherd Lead Us. So he started in.

*Savior, like a shepherd lead us,
Much we need thy tender care.
In thy pleasant pastures feed us,
For our use thy folds prepare.*

People listened intently and took in the words about how God shepherds us. After the song was over, a man stepped out of the crowd and said, "Did you ever serve in the Union Army?"

Sankey said yes because he had joined in the army in 1860. The man asked him if he had served in Maryland, and he had, in Sharpsburg. The other man continued. "Can you remember if you were on guard duty on a bright moonlit night in 1862?" Sankey was very surprised at this point and said "Yes, I do."

And the man said, "I did, too, but I was serving in the Confederate Army. I saw you standing at your post. I said to myself, 'That fellow will never get away from here alive.' I raised my musket and took aim. I was in the shadow, completely hidden, while you walked in full moonlight.

"At that instant, you began to sing — just like now. The song was 'Savior, like a shepherd lead us...' The music reached my heart. I took my finger off the trigger. 'I'll wait until the end of the song,' I said to myself. 'I can't miss him, and I can shoot him afterwards.'

"As you sang, you reached the place where it says,

*We are Thine, do Thou befriend us,
Be the guardian of our way...*

"I could hear every word perfectly, and how the memories came to my heart! I began to think of my childhood and my mother. She loved God. She had sung that song to me many times."

"At the end of the song, I could not raise my musket again. It was impossible for me to take aim, though you still stood in the bright moonlight, a perfect target.

"Then I thought of the Lord. I looked at you and thought, 'The Lord who was able to save that man from certain death must surely be great and mighty.' My arm dropped to my side and I cannot tell you all the things I thought at that time. My heart was smitten, but I didn't know what to do.

"Just now, when you were about to sing and stood quietly as if praying, I recognized you. I've been all over the place since that night. But I have never found that Shepherd. Please help me."

And right there on that ship, Ira Sankey threw his arm around his former enemy and introduced him to Jesus.

God is the guardian of our way. He protects us and offers us the rest that our souls crave. Because he is faithful and is exactly like he says he will be.

Do you feel like a sheep who can't sleep? What's keeping you from feeling settled? Is it a fear? Is it your relationships? Maybe something has been eating at you that won't let up. Or maybe you have been hungering for something more but finding you aren't satisfied.

This Christmas, you can know God as your shepherd, the shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. He's the only one who can meet all your needs and bring the joy the kids sang about this morning.

If you're like the man on that ship and don't know where to go, I'll stick around afterwards this morning. And I'd love the chance to pray with you.